DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 209 CS 002 545

AUTHOR Chaplin, Miriam T.
TITLE Implications in the Theory of George Kelly for College Reading Instruction.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Programs; Higher Education; *Personal Growth; *Personality Theories; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Kelly (George)

ABSTRACT

The Personal Construct Theory of George Kelly is considered particularly applicable to college reading instruction because the interpretations and subsequent reactions to written language by mature students are highly personal. The key to students' behavior lies in their total personality, enmeshed as it is with past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities. The discussion in this paper is based on the fundamental postulate that people's processes are psychologically channelized by the way they anticipate events, and on the 11 corollaries growing out of this postulate. An example of an application of Kelly's theory is the suggestion that it would be much more profitable to have students formulate their own questions about reading selections rather than respond to author written questions since students' questions will reflect the constructions placed on the reading by the students themselves. (MKM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122209

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Implications in the Theory of George Kelly for College Reading Instruction

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Miriam T. Chaplin

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Written by

Miriam T. Chaplin
Academic Foundations Department
Rutgers University
Camden, New Jersey

Presented:

Convention on College Composition
and Communication
March 27, 1976
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

CS 002 545

Implications in the Theory of George Kelly for College Reading Instruction

Introduction

In his preface to Emile, Rousseau challenges teachers to "study their pupils better."[1] The implication is that teachers should make an effort to get to know and understand their students as thoroughly as possible, for only then can they assist them in developing to their fullest potential.

Performance or overt behavior has traditionally provided the means whereby teachers have sought to understand students. It is assumed that performance denotes competence in the area of intellectual development and it is intellectual development that has been our most important concern. However, a student is at once a product of his physical, mental and emotional development and his behavior represents a composite of all these factors. The key to his behavior lies in his total personality enmeshed as it is with past experiences, present realities and future possibilities. Therefore,in order to guide him successively, his total personality must be considered in the light of all its complexities.

The Personal Construct Theory of George Kelly is the source of this discussion. Kelly developed his theory for use in psychotherapy, but its value and utility extend far beyond a particular reference. Its abstract nature is one of its strongest assets, for it is not bound by time, culture or content. It is particularly applicable to college reading instruction because the interpretations and subsequent reactions to written language by mature students are highly personal. The writer's purpose and message have as many meanings as there are readers. It is in these diverse interpretations that we discover the power of the written word and the heterogeneity of the human personality. Reading is inevitably a personal and private process in that the text serves as a backdrop for the reader's emotional and cognitive response.

Discussion

The structure of Personal Construct Theory is stated in a fundamental postulate with eleven corollaries each growing out of the fundamental postulate. Our discussion emanates from the projected ideas of this basic structure.

George Kelly views man as an active participant in the world. He does not simply react to events that are imposed upon his intellect and will, but has a creative capacity to represent them. By forming constructs of real events and reconstruing them as the need arises, man becomes the master of his fate, for his life is determined only by the construction he erects.

Constructs, as defined in the theory, contain similarities and contrasts but exclude irrelevancies. The constructs are imposed upon events, but are not contained in the events themselves. This allows for changes in constructs without a comparable change in the events. It also allows each person the freedom to construe events as he sees them. It is thus, on the basis of his constructs that a person behaves in a certain way and that behavior can only be understood by observers who can appreciate the complexity of the construct system. In the words of Kelly: "If we reach an understanding of how a person behaves, we discover it in the manner in which he represents his circumstances to himself."[2] In the light of this view, behavior becomes a means to an end and not an end in and of itself.

Therefore, Kelly turns our attention away from exhibited behaviors to reasons for the behaviors. It is not what students write about a selection or a book they have read or what they say in a class discussion that is of importance, but rather why they react in a particular way. If all behavior evoles from a student's construct system, then instructors and the students themselves need to be aware of the constructs that comprise the system. This does not mean that class sessions should be devoted to identifications of con-

struct systems. It does mean that the instructor ought to be knowledgeable about personality theories such as George Kelly's and inductively use their implications in the course of instruction and in all interpersonal communications with students. It means further that written and verbal responses should not be taken at face value, but that they should be analyzed for "replicated themes" of thought. Throughout this analysis, the contrasts should receive as much attention as the similarities, for Kelly believes that all constructs have these two aspects and all systems have dichotomous constructs. For example, if a student identifies an author's tone as being prejudiced, he can usually substantiate his claim by recalling what the author said and comparing it to what other "prejudiced" persons have said. He may also be able to define prejudice and relate the author's inferences to the definition. But the student implies by his statement that the author is not liberal. Can he also contrast the author's statements with those of other "liberal" persons? If he is asked to do this and does it successfully, he becomes aware that when he affirmatively labeled the author with "prejudice," he implicitly denied that he was "liberal." Both claims require proof if they are to have validity.

Kelly regards all men as scientists primarily interested in predicting and controlling their environment. In the minds of many students, however, they have no control over the written word. If the book says it is so, it is so. They feel that it would be almost blasphemous to question the book. So they read and repeat what they read in their own words, but retain the author's thoughts. Kelly's theory can help students understand that written language is not a given, but a reality over which they have exclusive control. It can be broadened, shortened and applied to various circumstances. Students should be encouraged to understand that once an author has released his work for publication, it belongs to the world. The copyright laws will protect it duplicatior, but nothing can protect its interpretation. Students will reach this level of understanding if they are called

upon to use their powers of interpretation to move beyond the author's ideas. There are times, to be sure, when exact recall is necessary, but this skill should be used only for a correct statement of the author's facts. From those facts, the students must draw their own conclusions. This experience of extending the thought, and not recall, is what aids students in elaborating their construct systems.

According to Kelly, we learn as we revise. A student's reaction to written language changes as his perspectives change. With the acquisition of new knowledge, the alert student sees more possible avenues of application. Therefore, the same questions need to be asked more than once. This might be accomplished in a reading class by having students read a book or selection on a particular topic at the beginning of the term and supply an interpretation. The same book or selection is then assigned at the end of the term. Usually, the reaction is quite different, for many constructs have been revised in the course of the semester. All too often instructors, in their quest to cover a predetermined amount of work in a specified period, do not maximize the strengths of in-depth learning which occurs as constructs are revised, discarded or extended. The reading instructor has an excellent opportunity to use this aspect of Kellian theory because there are no constraints on the breadth of material to be covered.

Bruner and Piaget have emphasized the importance of the structure of knowledge. Kelly is not as explicit on this point. However, in his construction corollary, he discusses the replications of events as a means of anticipating what is to follow. He, thus, seems to support the idea of discovering the structure of knowledge as a worthy pursuit. For if students can identify recurrent themes as they read, they can anticipate the outcome of new material and its relationship to the overall structure of the new and the old. Students should be shown the advantages of skimming a book for main ideas before they read as well as the advantage

of predicting questions and answers based on what they already know. As they do this, past reading will aid them in predicting what is to follow. Then, as they read more carefully, the theme or the structure will become more evident. An outline of a course at its beginning helps students to formulate a structure and follow the unfolding developments. This facilitates the discovery of replications.

Learning is thus the experience of accommodating new knowledge by replicating the theme of old knowledge. If our psychological processes are channelized by the way we anticipate events (Fundamental Postulate) and constructs are varied as events are replicated (Experience Corollary), there is a constant movement which is really the acquisition of knowledge or learning. This assumption may serve to excite educators or disturb them, for it implies that our students are learning if they are reconstruing. This is exciting. However, it may be disturbing to realize that they may not be learning what is contained in a carefully prepared syllabus. The learning that occurs is dependent on the constructions students place on events and their replications. Thus, the lecture may be teaching much more than is envisioned and the examination given by the lecturer can never reveal the extent of what was really learned. Acutally, the control tower of learning is occupied by the student and not the instructor. Certainly, what is read or heard in a classroom serves as a springboard for new knowledge just as all other experiences do, but where the students will land intellectually as a result of the leap can only be anticipated by the instructor.

Kelly supports and interdisciplinary approach to learning. He says:

> Events upon which facts are based hold no institutional loyalties. They are in the public domain. The same event may be construed simultaneously and profitably within various disciplinary systems.[3]

Therefore, the practice of utilizing the subject matter of the disciplines for the content of reading and encouraging students to view this content from different vantage points is sound. The reading instructor has another advantage over the content area instructors, for reading permeates all subject matter. A

more important advantage is that the reading instructor need not be viewed by the students as a specialist or a scholar in any discipline. The threat of challenging a "master" is removed and replaced by a mutual involvement in interpretation. In this atmosphere, the interdisciplinary approach can flourish.

Threat, aggression and hostility are discussed at length in Kelly's work. He views them as emotional aspects of personality which must be understood. All three of these factors become evident in the reading process. One is threatened when he reads something which he believes is true, but is not in accord with the way he thinks. Either he must reject the new idea or adjust his thinking. If he is aggressive, the adjustment will be made; if he chooses to retain a faulty construct in order to preserve his construct system, he becomes hostile to the idea whenever he meets it. It appears that the best way for a reading instructor, who is not a psychologist, to develop aggressive students instead of hostile ones, is to acquaint them with a wide range of reading materials with varying viewpoints. Some will be more digestible than others, but the exposure stirs the adjustment process. Hopefully, students will develop a sophistication in dealing with emotions which arise during reading and thus acquire the ability to use them as stepping stones to more improved constructs.

Most curriculums which have been designed for college reading consist of reading selections followed by questions designed to develop various reading skills. Students are asked to respond to the author's questions which are a product of his (the author's) construct system. In the light of Kelly's system, this is not the best approach. It is much more profitable to have students formulate their own questions. The reading then becomes, not a stimulus eliciting a response, but a bridge to new ideas. The questions will reflect the constructions placed upon the reading by the students themselves.

If one holds with Kelly, students cannot be penalized for errors in judgment.

He explains behavior in terms of the constructs which lead to actions. The temporary nature of errors renders them insignificant, for we are not captives of our miscalculations, but are free to reconstrue at any time. Hence, a student's progress should not be measured by the number of correct answers he supplies, but by the efficiency of his predictions and the powers of reconstruction. The student himself is the best evaluator of this ability. Therefore, he should be actively involved in determining his progress.

The sociality corollary points to the necessity of fostering interpersonal relations in the classroom. If students can understand their own construction systems, they can develop an empathy and appreciation for the ideas of others. This does not necessitate conformity, but it insures inter-group communication. Reading can lead the way from personal introspection to group participation. A student learns to interact with an author who is physically removed from his environment. From this experience, he learns to interact with those who are accessible to him. Reading, then, is a means of helping students find out who they are and once this is accomplished, they can get to know others.

Finally, Kelly frees us from the stronghold of the students' pasts. "No man is a victim of his own biography" are strong words for educators in any field. They destroy in one fell swoop all of the myths that abound in education concerning the inability of students to "rise above" or "fall below" their assessed intellectual potential.

Reading is the most assessed skill in the educative process. Individual students, as well as the student population of institutions and whole school districts, are often evaluated on their reading ability as determined by standardized tests. Reading scores haunt students from the earliest elementary grades to places of employment in adulthood. College instructors lower their expectations for students if they discover that they are reading far below national norms. However,

tests at their best can only measure previous learning and often are inadequate even in this respect. Kelly posits that behavior cannot be assessed from past performance, but is at once a manifestation of the past, present and future. Man's destiny is in his own hands and not in a percentile rating, if this theory is accepted. This does not mean that cultural heritage, educational disadvantages or innate ability do not affect a construction system. It means that these factors can be incidental if the person is alert and construes each event as it happens and adjusts his outlook accordingly. This will not make the mediocre student bright, but it will allow him to use his capacity to advantage and orient his thinking to meet reality with confidence.

If instructors are able to accept and internalize Kelly's theory, they can face students unmoved by scores on a reading test or the predictive indexes in the admissions office. They can meet them as wayfarers on the road in search of truth. They may not find it, but the journey can be made easier through the construction of systems which are bold enough to meet the world head-on and efficient enough to assimilate what is encountered.

Notes

[1]Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile au de l'education (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1964). p.2.

[2]George A. Kelly, A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1955), p.16.

[3]George A. Kelly, p.10.

The Structure of Personal Construct Theory

Fundamental Postulate: A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events.

Construction Corollary: A person anticipates events by construing their replications.

Individuality Corollary: Persons differ from each other in their construction of events.

Organization Corollary: Each person characteristically evolves, for his convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs.

Dichotomy Corollary: A person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs.

Choice Corollary: A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system.

Range Corollary: A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only.

Experience Corollary: A person's system varies as he successively construes the replications of events.

Modulation Corollary: The variation in a person's construction system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose ranges of convenience the variants lie.

Fragmentation Corollary: A person may successively employ a variety of construction subsystems which are inferentially incompatible with each other.

Commonality Corollary: To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person.

Sociality Corollary: To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person.